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HEART-TO-HEART

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A Pastoral Letter from Richard Foster



Dear Friends,

I want to share my heart with you about a project that writing-wise I have given myself to for the last four years—*The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*.

Searching for a Substantive Resource

For many years we sought to develop substantive resource materials that would help our RENOVARE community grapple with the Spiritual Formation implications of the Bible. More than once we commissioned one of our team members to write something, but each time we found that we were not producing what was really needed, and so we would halt the project. Finally, we determined to wait quietly on the Lord for guidance.

Then five years ago Steve Hanselman, Vice President and Publisher for HarperCollins, sat down with our team and proposed to us the development and publication of a unique Bible that would work with Scripture through the lens of Spiritual Formation. Now, you need to understand that I had been approached about specialty Bibles before and I have always refused. I turned them down because what people really wanted was little more than a "Hallmark Bible"—nice pictures and quotations that will reach a specialized consumer market. "Sorry," I would say, "I am not interested in producing a niche Bible." So, you can imagine I was not especially warm to Mr. Hanselman's idea when he first began. But I did listen, for I knew Steve to be a solid person, quite astute both in theology and publishing. For two days we vigorously discussed with Steve this Bible project idea:

- ! Dreaming of a Bible project that might bring together the best of biblical scholarship with the best of devotional thinking.
- ! Dreaming of a Bible project that was for the "educated plumber," ordinary men and women who are serious about their faith.
- ! Dreaming of a Bible project that would recover Scripture for the purposes of Christian Spiritual Formation for people in the real press of real life.

After two days I could see, first of all, that this was a serious proposal. Second, it soon became clear that Steve had a grasp of what needed to be done if we were really going to be helpful to people. And third, I could see that he was prepared to get the muscle of HarperCollins publishing behind this effort. Well, that put me into a writing task that has taken four years and involved over fifty theologians, pastors, and ordinary folk from all walks of life. This task will be completed next spring with the release of *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*.

A Moment of Great Opportunity

Let me explain to you why I feel this Bible project is so vitally important. When I first began writing about Spiritual Formation many years ago the soul hunger in people was so very obvious and the resources so very meager. Since that time a publishing avalanche has occurred on the subject—some writings genuinely helpful, some less than helpful. But throughout there has remained a huge gap, a gap that if not filled will seriously undermine all the gains that have been made. The gap I refer to is a substantive resource for approaching the Bible through the lens of Christian Spiritual Formation.

The desperate need today is for a richer, fuller understanding of the relevance of Scripture for daily living.

- ! We need a study Bible that will help us experience Scripture as living and active, forming and transforming.
- ! We need a study Bible that will combine the highest possible biblical scholarship with the deepest possible heart devotion.
- ! We need a study Bible that will lead us step by step into the glorious and terrifying “with-God life” which, like Ariadne’s thread, weaves its way throughout Scripture.
- ! We need a study Bible that will be substantive and accessible, serious and inviting, rigorous and hopeful.
- ! We need a study Bible that will aid us in seeing the great panorama of Divine interaction with the People of God throughout history and will invite us into this ongoing story.
- ! We need a study Bible that will draw us irresistibly into the biblical drama of love and terror and pity and pain and wonder until the biblical witness becomes all over autobiographic of us.

This is the gap needing to be filled, and I believe *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* will go a long way in this direction so that people can once again have a deep confidence in the Bible as a reliable resource for Christian Spiritual Formation..

Every feature in this Bible—from **the Essays** explaining the “with-God life” and showing how God has worked throughout history to nurture intimate fellowship with the people of God to **the Introductions and Notes** for each book of the Bible that provide the best scholarly background information and that highlight those issues that feed our souls to **the Spiritual Exercises** in each book that help us move beyond understanding the text to putting it into practice to **the fifty Profiles** of biblical characters that not only tell their stories but also reveal the secrets of how they found intimacy with God to **the Spiritual Disciplines Index** that defines sixteen Spiritual Disciplines and provides multiple Scripture references to unlock their central role in how we relate to God to **the Responding Questions and Exercises** that move the text from the head to the heart, from theory to practice—every feature focuses attention on God’s action in human life to produce one soul growth in grace. I am genuinely pleased with the result. This could well be the most important resource *RENOVARE* will ever produce.

What We Learned

Entering into this project we, the General Editors (myself, Gayle Beebe, Lynda Graybeal, Tom Oden and Dallas Willard), learned quickly that we are not in charge of this effort; God is in charge. It is not up to us to control what comes out of the Bible. We cannot “tilt” Scripture this way or that, rather we must give it complete freedom to “tilt” us as it will.

We came to understand that the Bible is all about human life *“with God.”* It is about how God made this *“with”* life possible and will bring it to pass. In fact, the name *Immanuel*, meaning “God is with us,” is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life, namely that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. **Indeed, we came to see that the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life “with God” as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus.**

But, we quickly came to the realization that we cannot simply add this “with-God life” into our little lives, picking and choosing what we want. No, if we want to receive from the Bible the life “with-God” that is portrayed *in* the Bible, we must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. Indeed, it requires that we give up our life and accept the divine invitation to participate in God’s great LIFE . . . which paradoxically will give us our true life.

We learned that we must come to Scripture humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only in this way could we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity in his written Word. We came to understand that the proper outcome of studying the Bible is growth in the supernatural power of love: love of God and of all people. And so much more.

An Invitation to Gather . . .

As we were working hard to bring this Bible resource to completion we also began dreaming about having an International Conference which would focus on Scripture and its importance in the Spiritual Formation of human beings. While this gathering will coincide with the launch of *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* it is in no way a four day "infomercial" for it. It is a serious wrestling with many of the themes in Scripture and will work to give us both a sense of the unifying sweep of God's action in history and a practical grasp of how the Bible functions today as a primary resource of Christian Spiritual Formation. And so, I want to extend an invitation to you to gather with us for this prayer-filled, energetic exploration into the dynamics of Scripture for Christian Spiritual Trans[^]Formation. The enclosed brochure will give you the details.

And to GATHER

What I want to stress here is the life-giving message of the Bible that the aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant. Scripture traces the formation of this community from the creation in the garden all the way to the new heaven and the new earth. And God is extending an invitation to you and to me to come on in, to *GATHER* if you will, into the Life of this blessed community.

My dear friend, there is a great river of Life that flows through Scripture into the thirsty wastelands of the human soul. Oh, may you, may I, surrender freely to this river of Life within the Bible, and increasingly receive this Life as our own.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.P.S. Related to the 2005 RENOVARE International Conference, if your church or organization is interested in becoming a regional, national, or international event Partner, please visit www.renovare.org/2005ic-partner or contact Lyle SmithGraybeal at 303-485-0670 or 2005ic-partner@renovare.org for more details.

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